

Ven. Eindobhasa

HISTORY OF BUDDHISM IN ARAKAN

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A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR
THE Ph. D. DEGREE
OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF CALCUTTA

CALCUTTA

1990

II - Religious Relations Between Arakan and Sri Lanka (Ceylon)

Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka (Ceylon) by Thera Mahinda who came to the Island in about the middle of the 3rd century⁷ B.C in the reign of King Asoka. It is generally accepted that at the time of the introduction of Buddhism, there was no organised religion in Ceylon. Owing to the popular enthusiasm, Buddhism became the state religion in Ceylon, under Royal patronage.

The Mahâvihara was established at Anurâdhapura in 3rd century B.C.⁸ In later times, Mahâvihâra became the great centre of Buddhist culture. As Mahâvihâra was famous Buddhist study centre, Abhayagiri vihâra constructed by Vattagamani Abhaya (29-17 B.C.)⁹ also became a great centre in Ceylon in the 1st century B.C.

The later part of the 1st century B.C saw some very important events in the Buddhist history of Ceylon. From 43 B.C. for 14 years, five Tamils rules in succession at Anurâdhapura. King Vattagamani lay in hiding in a remote palace during this period. In 1st century B.C. Mahâchûlika Mahâtissa was succeeded by Vattagamani's son, Choranaga. He was hostile and destroyed eighteen vihâras where he had not been given refuge during the days of his rebellion against his cousin Mahâchûlika Mahâtissa (17-3 B.C.)¹⁰

In addition to these calamities the whole country was ravaged by an unprecedented famine, generally known as BrahmanaTissa famine or

aminitiyâsyâ. The people had no food at all and were forced to cannibalism, even eating the flesh of Buddhist monks whom they venerated. Many thousands, both Buddhist monks and lay-people, perished, many vihâras were deserted, the Mahâvihâra at Anurâdhapura was entirely abandoned, trees grew in the countryard, and the Mahâthûpa itself lay in complete neglect. Many monks left the Island and went to India. The country was in chaos.¹¹

The elder monks of the Sinhalese saw that the future of Buddhism was in danger. The continuation of the tradition of the three Pitaka, which had so far been handed down orally from teacher to pupils, appeared no longer possible. The main concern of the Sangha during this tragic period was to preserve the teaching of Lord Buddha, which they valued above all else. Therefore, far-seeing Mahâthera, under the patronage of a local chief, assembled at Aluvihâra at Mâtale, and for the first time in history committed to writing the whole of the Tri Pitaka with the commentaries thereon "in order that the true doctrine might endure".¹²

In the first century A.D. there was the beginning of dissensions in the Sangha which had till then been united under the influence of the Mahâvihâra. At later times, the Dhammaruci sect (Abhayagiri vihâra group) became a separate group from Mahâvihâra known as Jetavana sect. Mahâvihâra Buddhism was replaced in Ceylon as a new religion in second century A.D.

According to the Arakanese chronicles, the relation between Ceylon and Arakan began from the second century A.D.¹³ During the reign of King Thuriyathiri (c.A.D. 201-221)¹⁴, twelve Arakanese monks led by Nanasiridhipadhi Mahâthera were sent for missionary purpose to Ceylon. It was the first relationship between the two countries. According to the Chûlavamsa, Vijayabahu - I (1065-1120) sent envoys with valuable gifts to Anuradha. The king of Râmañña (Lower Burma) sought his assistance in the struggle against the Chola invaders. But there is not much evidence that the King of Râmañña sent his troops to aid the King of Ceylon. K.L.Hazra says "During this time, Theravâda Buddhism was in a flourishing condition in lower Burma"¹⁵. The conquest of Thaton in 1057 was a great event in Burmese history. After the conquest of Thaton, Pagan became a famous Buddhist centre in South-East Asia.

In the same period, we believe that Arakan was the centre of original teachings of Lord Buddha and Arakanese chronicles also mention the religious relationship between Arakan and Ceylon. But the Ceylon are silent on Arakan's relation with Ceylon in this period. According to Arakanese chronicles, during the reign of Datharâzâ (1123-1139),¹⁶ The King of Ceylon sent envoys for religious purpose. The King of Arakan, Datharaza sent a Buddhist mission led by Ven. Atulaviijaya Mahâthera. Twenty-six venerable ones accompanied him.¹⁷

The Polannaruva slab inscription of the Velaikkaras (c.A.D. 1137-

(1153)¹⁸ also refers to the purification of the Saṅgha of the three sects of Ceylon with the help of the monks from Arumana during Vijayabahu-I's time. Arumana may be suggested as Arakan. In 1166,¹⁹ King Manjuthin was succeeded by his son, Ngaraman. During his time, a religious mission including 36 Buddhist monks were sent to the King of Ceylon, Parakramabahu-I (c.A.D. 1153-1186). This mission was led by Ven. Uttara Dhamma. But the period between the death of Vijayabahu I and Parakramabahu I can be described as a dark chapter in the history of Ceylon. According to K.L. Hazra "During this period neither the Burmese sources such as the Śāsanavamsa, the Glass Palace Chronicle nor the Sinhalese sources such as Chūlavamsa mention any religious or political contact between Ceylon and Burma".²⁰

In Arakanese history, Mrauk-U signifies the golden age. The 15th and 16th centuries A.D. were important landmarks in the history of both Arakan and Ceylon. There is evidence to show that during these centuries close political, cultural and religious ties existed between the two countries. King Ba-saw-phru (1459-1482) received three Piṭakas from Ceylon in c.A.D. 1476,²¹ and the King of Arakan sent a religious delegation led by Ven. Siddhattha.

In the 16th century, Arakan was a sea-power of some importance; it built hundreds of galliots and developed great skill in both sea and riverine warfare. During the reign of Nanda Bayin (1581-1599)²² of Pegu, he wanted to raise and equip new armies to fight against
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the Siamese like his father Bayin Naung and request the Mons to join the army.²³ Many Mons crossed over the border of Arakan and Siam and took refuge in both countries. Nanda Bayin attacked Siam about five times between 1586 and 1593. He put to death many of their officers and destroyed the country of Mon. Many Mon monks and lay-people left the country and fled to Siam and Arakan. The Siamese attacked Pegu in 1595.²⁴ At the same time, Arakan defeated and conquered the Pegu and Syriam, one of the important port of Lower Burma. During the reign of Minrâzâkri (1593-1613)²⁵, Arakan received the vast loot brought back by its raiders from Pegu together with Nanda Bayin's daughter and white elephant. At the end of the 16th century A.D. Bayin Naung has lost power in the country.

In the 16th century, the relation between Arakan and Ceylon played an important role in Buddhism and culture²⁶. As Ola leaf manuscript of the Kakdadora great found in Ceylon, refers to religious intercourse between Rakkhangapūra²⁷ and Ceylon. This information is corroborated by the Chûlavamsa, the Sulupujavaliya and the Narendracharitâvalokapradipikâva. During the reign of Vimaladhammasuriya-I, when Ceylon was in need of some monks to restore the Buddhist Sangha, the King of Ceylon sent an envoy to Rakkhangapūra and invited a Buddhist mission for restoring the Sangha. At that time, King Khaung-râzâ (1521-1631)²⁸ ruled in Arakan. He appointed his son, Min bar as a governor of Sandoway. Prince Min-bar selected Ven. Tejosâra from Sandoway and Ven. Dhammavilâsa from Mrauk-U to send on a religious mission. The

King of Ceylon warmly received the two Arakanese monks who came to preach the teachings of the Buddha in Ceylon.

The Arakanese monks were given the sacred tooth relic of Lord Buddha which Ceylon proudly possessed on their return. They brought it and gave it to Min-bar as a gift from the King of Ceylon. In the reign of Min-rāzā-kri, an envoy with the gift arrived in Mrauk-U and King of Arakan sent 20 Buddhist monks led by Ven. Chandavilāsa Mahāthera to Ceylon. They arrived there in 1563. They reformed the Buddhist Saṅgha and held the higher ordination ceremony in the Udakukkhepapsîmā.

The Chûlavamsa and the Sâsanavamsa contain important evidence relating to the religious intercourse between Arakan and Ceylon in the reign of Vimaladhammasuriya II. Both refer to the arrival of the Sinhalese envoys in Rakkhiṅgapūra²⁹ and to how the Arakanese monks restored the Buddhist Saṅgha and established the religion in Ceylon. During the reign of King of Mārūpiya (1696-1697), King of Ceylon, Vimaladhammasuriya II sent a mission to Rakkhaṅgapūra. After receiving the message from Sinhalese mission, King Marūpiya selected Ven. Indamanju, the monk-in-charge of Sattathâna monastery and Ven. Nandichakka, the priest of Laung-krat monastery, and sent forty Arakanese monks led by two venerable ones to Ceylon in 1696³⁰. When they arrived they were received with great honour and the Upasampada ordination was held under the leadership of Nandichakka in the Udakukkhepasîmā on the Mahāvaluka ganga or

Maliganga at Getambe near Peradeniya in 1696.³¹ Several members of the royal and noble families were ordained. Thus Sinhalese Buddhist Sangha was restored by Buddhist monks from Arakan and they held the higher ordination in Ceylon.

A manuscript³² recording the religious intercourse between Arakan and Ceylon, was discovered at the Kadadora Vihâra in Gannave Korale of Udahevahata in the district of Nuvara Eliya in the central province of Ceylon. The Chûlavamsa, however, does not make any reference to Ven. Chandavilâsa, but only to Ven. Nandichakka.³³ The Sulupâjavaliya mentions the names of both Theras.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, when Buddhist Ceylon had suffered severely as a result of internal trouble and foreign occupation, Arakan helped Ceylon to re-establish and restore religious ceremonies and higher ordination in Ceylon. At present, Theravâda Buddhism of Ceylon is being spread widely in the world and Sinhalese Buddhists have set up famous Buddhist study centres in Ceylon. The Mahâbodhi Society, originating in Ceylon has become the famous Buddhist Research Centre, in the Buddhist world.

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